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Faith community sponsors vigil in Columbia

'Black lives matter' part of nationwide focus on justice system, remembers victims

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McKenzie Cochran; Jordan Baker; Andy Lopez; Eric Garner; Mike Brown.

More than 100 people gathered in Columbia Dec. 12 for a vigil to remember these men and boys — all black, unarmed and killed by police — as well as dozens of others.

Their plea, delivered after each name was read: "Not one more."

Stationed at all four corners of the intersection of Tamar Drive and Route 175, the group sang, chanted and waved signs and battery-powered plastic candles in the below-40-degree weather as cars rushed by during the evening commute. Many drivers honked their horns in support.

"We're here to bring attention to the fact that black lives matter," said the Rev. Janelle Bruce Smith, a vigil organizer and youth pastor at St. John Baptist Church, which lit up the night behind where the crowd stood.

"This is really a vigil for remembrance,"

Jen Hayashi, another organizer and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia, said. "We're trying to honor the victims, raise visibility and come together to do something."

The vigil was one of many held nationwide in recent weeks, as renewed attention has been focused on the justice system after two grand juries, one in Ferguson, Mo., and another in New York, decided not to indict the white police officers who killed 18-year-old Michael Brown, a Ferguson man shot in August; and Eric Garner, who died after being put in a chokehold when arrested by police in Staten Island in July.

Unlike protests elsewhere, the dynamic between crowd and police was calm and congenial. Smith said the Police Department had called before the vigil to offer its support, and officers directed traffic at the busy intersection as protesters stood behind bright orange barriers that police had set up to separate them from passing cars.

Many in the crowd Friday night, which was a diverse group of people of different ages and races, said they felt compelled to come out because they feared a loved one, or themselves, could just as easily have been a victim.

"I'm out here because I know I'm not immune to that," said Mikal Walcott, of

Fulton. The senior at Reservoir High School, who serves as president of Alpha Achievers, a Howard County educational group for black teenage boys, said it's "important that people deal with their implicit racial biases. I think this is one way to deal."

His friend, Oakland Mills High School senior Ukwuoma Ukaire, said it scared her "how close to home these things can happen."

"I have a lot of black male friends and would never want to see something like that happen to them," she said. "I think in Howard County we think we're immune."

Paula Seabright, of Columbia, said she's seen prejudice close to home. Seabright, who is white, attended the vigil with her husband, who is black, and one of their sons.

"This is why I'm here," she said pointing to her family. She said her oldest son, a high schooler, has had fellow classmates question why he is in Advanced Placement courses.

"They told him he is only there to meet a quota," Seabright said, tearing up. "And it hurts. It really hurts."

Inita Nesmith, of Columbia, said she hoped for a better future for her 2-year-old son.

"I don't want to be Ms. Garner or Ms.

Brown," she said. "I'm just out here showing them support. There's no place I'd rather be on a Friday night."

Also among the crowd were Councilman Calvin Ball and Del. Liz Bobo, both Democrats from Columbia.

Ball said he came because "I strongly believe that every life matters."

Though he said Howard County had fewer issues than other parts of the nation, "I think that we can continue to build upon our goal of community policing and collaboration to make sure that everyone feels safe, and I think there is always an opportunity to improve."

Bobo, who ends her career next month as a longtime delegate, and is also a former county executive and councilmember, said she thought Howard County "certainly [has] work to do."

"We can't equate economic status with race, but we do not do very well in Howard County as far as economic justice, as far as I'm concerned," she said, citing what she considers a dearth of affordable housing in the area.

She said Howard had the unique legacy of founder Jim Rouse's vision to carry on, as well.

"Jim Rouse built this community for racial and economic integration, and he really did; it wasn't lip service," she said.